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EDITORIAL COMMENT

The committee on life-histories of mammals promises to be one of the most active of the standing committees of the American Society of Mammalogists. President Merriam appointed as the chairman of this committee, Dr. Charles C. Adams, director of the Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station, New York College of Forestry, Syracuse, New York; and asked the chairman to name the other members of his committee. Doctor Adams now announces his selections as follows: Dr. Rudolph M. Anderson, zoologist, Biological Division, Geological Survey of Canada; Mr. Vernon Bailey, chief field naturalist, Biological Survey United States Department of Agriculture; Dr. Harold C. Bryant, Bureau of Education, Publicity, and Research, California Board of Fish and Game Commissioners; Dr. Lee R. Dice, curator of mammals, Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan; Dr. Hartley H. T. Jackson, assistant biologist, Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture; Dr. T. S. Palmer, assistant biologist, Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture; Mr. Ernest Thompson Seton, Greenwich, Connecticut; Dr. Walter P. Taylor, assistant biologist, Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture; and Mr. Herbert Lang, assistant curator mammalogy, American Museum of Natural History. Mr. Lang is chairman of a subcommittee on exotic mammals. Good results may be expected from such a committee, and, in any work planned, the chairman may confidently look for the hearty coöperation of all the members of the Society.

The second annual meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists will be held in New York City, beginning Monday, May 3, 1920.

Since the first number of the Journal has been issued, many letters regarding it have been received. All speak enthusiastically of the initial number, and, as requested by the editor, many make suggestions for future improvement. Each criticism or suggestion has been listed and before the close of the year all will have the careful consideration of the committee on publications. It has been deemed best to make no conspicuous changes in the make-up, typography, or style of the Journal except at the beginning of a new volume, so there will be plenty of time to weigh carefully all arguments for proposed improvements. The most general of all these friendly, helpful criticisms is regarding the lack of articles on "life-history." If this is a serious fault, it is one for which the management is in no way to blame; and if we are to have a more nearly balanced magazine those members who are particularly interested in the habits of mammals must furnish the articles and notes for publication. It may be said, however, that several important contributions of this kind are already promised and it is expected that before long the pages of the Journal will contain a fair proportion of interesting papers on the life-histories of mammals.

The actual date of publication of the first number of the Journal of Mammalogy was November 28, 1919.

Mr. Seton's letter on the English names of mammals in this number of the Journal brings this troublesome question up for discussion. It is a matter that will bother the editors of the Journal for all time, for, unlike the case with birds,

the great majority of our small mammals have no common names, and authors are forever inventing them. Unhappily these newly invented names are often absurd, as Mr. Seton rightly says, and they very rarely fill any good purpose.

The truth is that at present comparatively few of our small mammals need specific or subspecific vernacular names; a single common name for all the members of a genus is frequently quite sufficient, and for writers of technical mammalogy to invent such names merely that their books or lists may be, in a sense, complete or consistent, is folly. The best plan unquestionably would be for authors of works on mammals to use only such common names as are actually in service; ignore ridiculous book names invented without sufficient cause; and, for a host of our species, wait until real names do appear in the language. If the comparatively few names introduced into the literature of North American mammals by Audubon and Bachman, and other early writers, have so signally failed, what then is the prospect for some of the later inventions now that our list of mammals has increased many-fold since those classic works were prepared.

The most ambitious recent attempt at giving all of our mammals common names was that of the late D. G. Elliot, who systematically coined English names for most of the American forms. Beginning with his *Land and Sea Mammals of Middle America and the West Indies* in 1904, and continuing through several later works on the mammals of America and other parts of the world, Elliot thought it necessary to provide every single species and subspecies with a vernacular name. Without, apparently, any serious attempt to find out what names might already have been given to a few of these creatures, in print or otherwise, he proceeded to coin as unreasonable a collection of names as could well be imagined. One of the principal sources for these names was the technical names of the mammals, which he merely translated into English. The results are wonderful to behold. How many persons, including the most learned of professional mammalogists, know today what mammal is named the fighting bear, the thievish coyote, dark coati, allied weasel, irrational shrew, prominent-eared bat, doubtful kangaroo rat, graceful bat, captious harvest mouse, Hamilton Smith's white-tailed deer, beautifully garbed chipmunk, cunning red-backed vole, trader spermophile, robust field mouse, beautiful mole mouse, least upland meadow vole, roaming pocket gopher, alien mouse, sand-frequenting pocket gopher, smallest spiny mouse, autocrat timber wolf, robber raccoon-fox, happy chipmunk, narrow-headed spotted skunk, or the curtailed fox? These atrocities are not carefully selected to show the horror of it all—they are listed at random in a few moments' time. There are hundreds equally bad, including the cantankerous meadow vole, the cheating woodrat, the tricky coyote, and the degenerate otter. They were always carefully double-indexed in a special section called "Index of Common Names!"

Very few of these names have ever been copied by other writers and certainly none of them have worked their way into the language of the layman or of the amateur naturalist, for whose benefit it is assumed they were coined. Occasionally we see some of them in print, probably because some author thinks it advisable to use names already formally bestowed upon certain animals rather than to make new ones. But of what use are they? Why *should* we use them? They are not common names in any sense, and they never will be known even to men devoting their lives to the study of mammalogy. In listing mammals,

there surely is no harm in leaving some obscure species and many geographical races without special English names. If they have no English names, and many species are almost unknown to the residents of the region where they abound, it is far better to wait for the name to come naturally, as it will if required. How much better it is to have an open field for a good, real name, a "pat name," as Mr. Seton calls it, than to have our literature burdened with these utterly useless, hopeless, and impossible names made up on the spur of the moment by writers, merely to fill out their books, or perhaps reluctantly admitted because some editor, who knows nothing of the case, insists that every animal have an English name.

Common or English names are necessary for well-known species or groups of species. A few more might at present be useful for species-groups of such mammals as white-footed mice, meadow mice, wood rats, and others. Groups of forms known to hunters, trappers, naturalists in general, farmers and others, indeed most mammals that are commonly observed, or actually *need* them, already have good local names; if we but inquire among those familiar with the animals we may learn them and from them select good ones for use in print. Like the local names of birds, such names are sometimes used for different species in different localities. The pocket gopher is called salamander in Florida, where a tortoise is the gopher; and the spermophile is called gopher in parts of the West. This and other cases are as confusing as partridge and pheasant among bird names. In such cases it is perhaps best to persist in the use of a good book-name like pocket-gopher, spermophile, or ground-squirrel. If the name is a good one it may eventually win, just as ruffed grouse has become quite generally understood almost anywhere within the range of that species.

The common names in use for most distinct species of well-known mammals may be modified by geographical or other pertinent adjectives if it is necessary to have special English names for closely related forms or subspecies. But just because a form is recognized by the specialist, and is given a technical name, does not make it necessary that it have, at once, an English or common name differing from that of some closely related form, a form perhaps impossible for anyone except the specialist to distinguish. Only the specialist needs names for these slight subspecies, and he has provided the technical names for his own use.

Real, honest, actually-used local names should be collected, published, and made available. But let us stop coining absurd "book-names" for every small mammal we need to mention. And above all, let us cease to try to perpetuate or force into the language such names as listed above. They serve no purpose whatever, most of them stand no chance of survival, and it is perhaps actually harmful to use them in print.

—N. H.